

GOVERNMENT AND THE GOOSE (that lays the golden eggs)

I am confident that everyone who travels abroad and has visited our island loves to return to Aruba. Our island is indeed blessed and this becomes more and more evident when we visit other islands and countries - all of which have their own challenges. It makes one reflect that at the end of the day what do we Arubans really have to complain about? We live on an island where we wake up each morning with little to be really concerned about. We take a shower, prepare our kids for school and other than 10 minutes of bumper-to-bumper traffic we usually experience hassle-free car rides throughout the day in consistently good weather. It does make one wonder: can it get any better? My sons believe it cannot get any better...but then they do not deal with the one sector that I believe would add value to an already pretty stress-free life. Because

"Life is Good..." until one needs Government in Aruba. I was reminded how good life was when I recently received a letter in the mail from DIMAS stating that our live-in housekeeper had 6 weeks to leave the island since she had changed employer; Life was pretty good until the hotel I am currently operating and which has been open for 25 years turned out not to have a hotel permit and we ended up taking the Government to Court as we were denied a permit; and Life

was good until building permits by DOW simply were not addressed; and Life was pretty good until a front desk agent requested a permit to be transferred to another department and the 3 persons who responded to an advertisement in the newspaper for the vacant position all turned out to be in their sixties and besides having arms and legs were not qualified for the job.

The early challenge to life is good, however, will present itself in 2009 when thousands of current hospitality workers will be asked to leave Aruba only to be replaced by workers who will be granted a permit for 3 years only and with more hotel rooms and condos on line we will be in even more need for fresh foreign workers. Years ago the Aruba Timeshare Association made several suggestions to the Government:

1. ATSA suggested that the moratorium be released for conservative and sustainable expansion projects. ATSA believed that requests for the expansion of existing Resorts should be favorably considered since the overall staffing (and other) impact would be minimal because these Resorts already had solid operational infrastructures in place. However, what did we see? A colossal new condominium hotel expansion boom with a few thousand units in the pipeline! Meanwhile, a petition of an existing Resort for an extension of just 3 units was denied while on the corner of this very Resort 554 units are under construction. Are we having double standards or what?

2. ATSA also suggested a speedier admission process upon arrival in Aruba by means of swipe cards especially for repeat guests which amount to some 250,000 persons a year and a related recommen-

dation was more customer service training for immigration and custom officials, taxi dispatcher's service at the airport and uniformed and courteous taxi drivers for our visitors. The suggestion of the swipe cards goes back to 1996 and consequently is not a new one but nothing has been done to date.

3. With regard to our foreign work force with legitimate work permits, ATSA recommended the implementation of a green card system which would be valid for a period of 3 years instead of the present lengthy and frustrating administration of handling work permits every year. Nothing has been done to date.

One suggestion I personally made at a Tourism Retreat in my position as Director of ATA in 1998 (which suggestion ultimately caused my downfall in this position in 2000 and I am still proud of it) was that The Position of Minister of Tourism and Transportation should have a professional and not a politician at its head. I have nothing against our current Tourism Minister, but on many issues we have failed to make progress or are not making progress as we should. The idea of a product Development department currently explored by ATA and the Ministry believe it or not stems from an ATA Marketing plan since 1996. So does it take us 12 years to expedite an idea? The privatization of ATA is off the front burners at this time yet a marketing office today with all new available technology can be managed far more effectively than what currently obtains... but whom are you going to call upon to make this happen? NOT A POLITICIAN.

What is the current reality? Instead of cleaning our island which is a BIG priority # 1, we have several Government officers spending time and our taxpayer's money in determining

how many palapas each hotel should have and to make it absolutely clear that beaches are public. A huge concrete totem pole that is totally environmental unfriendly will denote the leased boundaries of each property and from there the idea is that there will be a determined amount of open space which, if Government were to have its way, would entail that a great deal of palapas would have to be removed because we should be able to see the ocean from the boardwalk according to some Government officials. While I do not disagree with such stipulations for any new development, it should be stated that the same Government that gave out permits for existing structures is now questioning the amount of palapas erected. This is absurd and should have been enforced at the time of construction. Fortunately, voices within the Coastal Zone Management are more reasonable in their suggestion that any new policy should only apply to structures under construction. I love the new policy of creating a matching ratio between palapas and accommodation units because this would restrict new large developments on Aruba's limited beach front but would allow for smaller boutique Resorts which would fit perfectly into our sustainable

expansion and development which was so ably reflected in Sam Cole's report. BUT, leave it to Government to change its own policy if it finds it convenient.

The bottom line: the Private and Public sector should talk more to each other. Government should not rule but facilitate in an environment where we are so dependent on something as fragile as Tourism. Government should not ask for our opinion once every four years but more frequently approach the private sector and ask, "What can we do for you?" That's what I do with my staff and that's what I do with our customers: "How can we serve you better". Create account management where Government departments like DIMAS and DOW, Public Health, Serlimar etc. would on occasion visit local businesses and ask the simple question: "Is there anything we should do more, less or the same and are you happy?" I know that some of you what may be thinking that this is asking too much but is it really? WEB does it! And there is no doubt in my mind that because of this interaction many positive changes have taken place in the last couple of years. However, I am also firmly convinced that we can do far better by ha-

ving proper dialogue. There is nothing as annoying to hear a Government official say that a policy is nothing more than a discussion piece while on TV it was announced as a done deal.

In turbulent times when 40% of our major market is considering IF they will go on vacation in 2009, it is definitely not a good time for our Government bureaucrats to dream up unrealistic and unnecessary regulations while sitting in their air-conditioned offices. Let's not kill that goose that lays the golden eggs. A Government tourism friendly destination will pay large dividends as it did at the end of eighties! Let's talk! ■

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